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WEDNESDAY, JULY 8, 2009

## SCUSD's \$12 Million Budget Shortfall Dictates Big Cuts

By Carolyn Schuk

When school bells ring this September, students in Santa Clara Unified School District (SCUSD) might be sitting in larger classes and enjoying fewer programs. That's because the district faces a \$12 million shortfall, attributable to sharply reduced local tax revenue and state funding cuts. Contrary to assertions that public school budgets are feather-bedded with "fat," almost all of the cost-cutting choices open at this late date are to programs that directly serve students and the community.



"My number one goal after student safety, is student achievement," says SCUSD Superintendent Steve Stavis. "If I look at these cuts and ask if they will impact that goal, the answer is yes."

Sacramento's now-chronic budgeting paralysis has turned district planning into a protracted game of musical chairs. But while the state government can continue its Kabuki budgeting drama indefinitely, state law requires the district to finalize staffing plans - and any layoffs for the coming school year - by March 15.

"Santa Clara Unified has always balanced our budget," says School Board Trustee Andy Ratermann. "We've always had our budget in on time. We've always planned for bad times and we have never come to the voters [asking] for a parcel tax.

"But because of the state's inability to plan [in recent years], there's an information vacuum. When we sit down to plan, we're planning in quicksand," he continues, laying out just how deep that quicksand is.

"In February the budget was okay. By March we were down \$2.5 million, but were able to cover that. We made some difficult cuts, we let some top-level staff go, but we kept cuts away from students. And we decided not to lay off teachers. Then in May, the state cut categorical aid [funding for specific programs]. That took us to a \$4.2 million deficit.

That first round of budgeting cut several hourly and district office job positions; school library improvement funds; mentoring programs for beginning teachers; and arts, music and equipment grants.

But the worst was yet to come. In June the state handed down a \$600 per-student cut. Called a "fair share" in Sacramento newspeak, the decrease equalizes cuts across California's two school funding formulas - revenue limited and basic aid [see California School Funding Crib Sheet].

"We've just closed a \$4.2 million gap and now we have another \$8 million in cuts," says Ratermann in an exasperated tone. "That adds up to \$12 in total budget cuts - ten percent of our budget. I just found out today that they're going to cut another \$900,000 for transportation. And," he emphasizes, "we still don't know what the state is going to do when they finally pass a budget. So we're going to exert what little control we have."

This includes cutting after school sports or increasing fees, selling school property, using capital reserve funds, in-house suspension programs, and Adult Education. The board is also seriously considering a parcel tax. And without dramatic changes in the financial picture, SCUSD won't be able to support summer school and after school programs in 2010.

"We're going to have to make big cuts," says Superintendent Stavis. "Adult Ed is one of the biggest programs where we have flexibility." Currently, \$7.2 million is budgeted for Adult Ed.

Another possible cost-saving measure is furlough days. "It saves \$400,000 a day and would affect every employee equally," explains SCUSD Public Information Officer and Career Technical Education Coordinator Tabitha Keppler-Hurley. "We hope that all our employee groups working together as a team would allow us to

keep more programs for our students and more staff positions."

Beyond the coming year, another cost-saving strategy is increasing class size. Although the state reduces per-student funding if class size exceeds 20, savings in salaries would deliver a net benefit to the district's bottom line. For example, increasing K-3 classrooms to 25 students yields \$1.7 million in savings. Raising class size to 30 would save \$4 million.

But the other side of that picture, teacher layoffs, is a grim one. First, layoffs undermine morale. Second, because state law requires the least senior teachers to be laid off first, layoffs create a teaching "experience gap" that harms students in years to come.

"We have some remarkable programs in our district and a lot of districts come to us [for guidance] because we have such cutting edge programs," says Ratermann. "We are looking for ways to get as much local control over our finances as possible. One thing we're confident in is that the local community will support us."

For information about Santa Clara Unified School District, visit [www.santaclarausd.org](http://www.santaclarausd.org). You can download the proposed budget - Bd Agenda Pkt Part 1 6-25-09.pdf and Bd Agenda Pkt Part 2 6-25-09.pdf - at [www.santaclarausd.org/overview.cfm?subpage=145153](http://www.santaclarausd.org/overview.cfm?subpage=145153). For more information about California's K-12 education, visit Ed-Data at [www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/Navigation/fsTwoPanel.asp?bottom=/indexDB.asp](http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/Navigation/fsTwoPanel.asp?bottom=/indexDB.asp).

#### California School Funding Crib Sheet

Baffled by California's labyrinthine system for funding public schools funding? Here's an overview to help dispel the confusion:

Basic aid districts - like Santa Clara Unified - get most of their funding from local property taxes and, thus, receive a minimum per-pupil amount from the state. By contrast, revenue limited districts - like Campbell Union - are funded primarily with state per-student allocations. Fewer than 100 of California's almost 1,000 school districts are basic aid districts.

The reasoning behind the legislature's "fair share" cuts this year is: if the budgets of revenue-limited districts have dropped by a certain percentage, the basic aid district budgets should be equally affected.

This complicated funding scheme had its genesis in the California Supreme Court's 1976 decision *Serrano v. Priest*, where the court ruled that financing schools with local property taxes violated the State Constitution's Equal Protection Clause, and that property tax rates and per pupil expenditures had to be equalized. By dramatically cutting property taxes, Proposition 13 in 1978 effectively shifted school funding from property taxes to the state's general funds.

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